

Trends in French Films¹

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In analyzing French films during the past eight years, we have found certain themes, which struck us at the start, repeated again and again; we have become aware of a number of additional themes; we have observed some countertrends that may represent new developments; and we have elaborated further hypotheses about relations between these fantasy productions and typical life situations. The order in which these observations and interpretations were made has been affected by the following conditions: (a) the order in which the films were seen, which depended largely on accidents of accessibility; (b) factors of individual sensibility, that make one see certain things more quickly than others; and (c) the concurrent accumulation of data on other aspects of French culture,² which contributed to awareness and insight in our study of films.

The following report is based on about fifty films, seen since 1950 in New York and Paris, about half of which have not been brought to America. Much new material could be cited in which one sees continued preoccupation with earlier themes (e.g., intense father-daughter relations; the suffering or spiteful outsider looking in on the pleasures of others). However, because of limitations of space we shall turn directly to a number of themes not previously reported and indicate some connections between them and other recent findings about French culture.

1. *Fear of falling back into childhood.* In French culture, according to one of our basic hypotheses, everything is permitted to the adult that is denied to the child. Interferences with the pursuit of pleasure, enforced

¹ This article is based on assumptions and a method of analysis which we have described elsewhere in detail. Cf. Wolfenstein, Martha, and Leites, Nathan, *Movies: A Psychological Study*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950; Wolfenstein, Martha, "Film Analysis in the Study of Culture," in Mead, Margaret, and Métraux, Rhoda, *The Study of Culture at a Distance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953; Wolfenstein, Martha, and Leites, Nathan, "Plot and Character in Selected French Films," in Métraux, Rhoda, and Mead, Margaret, *Themes in French Culture* (Hoover Institute Studies, Series D, Communities, No. 1), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954; Wolfenstein, Martha, "The Image of the Child in Contemporary Films," in Mead, Margaret, and Wolfenstein, Martha, *Childhood in Contemporary Cultures* (in preparation).

² The studies of French culture on which we have drawn are the following: (a) work carried on in the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures (1947-1949), in which we participated, and which has been reported on in Métraux, Rhoda, and Mead, Margaret, *Themes in French Culture* (Hoover Institute Studies, Series D, Communities, No. 1), Stanford: Stanford University Press 1954; (b) researches on France, pursued by Nathan Leites and a research team in Paris (1953-1954), the results of which have not yet been published.

by adults on children, tend to a large extent not to be internalized. The individual's capacity for pleasure emerges unblunted, once he escapes, by becoming an adult, from the surveillance of authorities. Many traits characteristic of the French adult may be interpreted as doing the opposite of what one had to do as a child. Thus, in French adult life, particularly in public life, there is a tendency toward indefinite delay, not getting things done. French children are under constant pressure to do required tasks quickly, to put away their toys, finish their lessons, and so on. We would suppose that the underlying feeling expressed in the delaying tactics of adult life is: Now that I'm grown up, I'll dally as much as I like. While French children are hurried and harried about doing tasks, their spontaneous activity in speech and movement is radically interfered with. They are required to sit still and be quiet. By contrast French adults, following a similar principle of opposition to the one just indicated, are very quick in speech and movement.

Margaret Mead has pointed out that Americans have a great fear of falling back into the situation of a child; for Americans this means becoming again dependent on others.³ For the French, who equally fear falling back into childhood, this danger has a different significance. It means falling again under the power of authorities who can effectively interfere with the satisfaction of one's wishes. In a film of the 1930's (seen by us only recently), *Vous N'Avez Rien à Déclarer?*, a young man becomes impotent when on his wedding night a customs inspector breaks into the sleeping compartment on the train, where he is about to make love to his bride, and demands in the brusque tones of an authority which the young man had thought he was finished with: "Vous n'avez rien à déclarer?" He regains his manhood after he has given a thorough beating to an actor who appears in the role of a customs inspector. By triumphing over this embodiment of authority, he reemerges from his relapse into childhood and can proceed to the fulfillment of his desires.

To impose on oneself the restrictions of childhood, to perpetuate voluntarily the regime imposed by the authorities, when one is grown-up and one's parents are no longer there, is ludicrous. This is exemplified in the foolishly limited existence of four old-maid sisters in *Ces Dames aux Chapeaux Verts*. They all dress alike, like little girls, always go to early mass, never go anywhere except together. This mode of life is finally disrupted by a lively young woman, a cousin of theirs, who is forced by financial reverses to give up her free life in Paris and come and live with these provincial relatives. The young woman has no intention of reverting to childhood; instead she teaches the old maids a lesson in growing up. She not only succeeds in finding in this unlikely spot a very attractive young man for herself, but she revives a long-abandoned romance of the youngest of the old maids. This romance, with a school teacher, had been nipped by the long-dead mother years before, as a misalliance. The young

³ Mead, Margaret, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, New York: Morrow, 1942.

girl demonstrates that it is high time to set aside the outdated taboo of the dead mother, and she joins the hands of the aging couple. Before she is through another of the old maids has also been provided with a husband, and the eldest and severest of them has shown herself not immune to flirtation, and has confided to the young girl how joyless is the lot of an old maid. There is no glory in virtue, only the unnecessary limitation of prolonging childhood beyond its proper time.

We had observed in our earlier analysis of French films that repeatedly a character who was put in jail, however innocent he might be, was impelled to attempt suicide. We lacked at the time an interpretation of this behavior. Now we are inclined to explain it in terms of despair at being thrown back into childhood, in the sense of falling again under the control of authorities. A recent film, *Marchandes d' Illusions*, illustrates the loss of adult prerogatives on the part of the individual who is thrown into prison. The prerogative in this case is that of discretion about one's own secrets. The child has no right to secrets; when one is an adult one gains control over the information about oneself that others have access to. The innocent woman who is jailed in this film loses control over her secrets in a way which is devastating for her. She is a prostitute who has successfully concealed her profession from the man she loves. When she is falsely suspected of a murder, she steadfastly refuses to use the alibi that she was with her lover at the time the crime was committed, as she fears that by talking with the police he will learn her secret. A well-meaning woman missionary acts for the girl's own good, despite her wishes (just as parents do with a child), brings the young man to the police station to establish the alibi, where, just as the girl feared, he finds out about her profession and breaks with her.

2. *Wish to have someone do it for you.* This is a theme for which we have as yet slight evidence, but which we record because of its congruence with other themes to be noted below: a sense of men's weakness in relation to women, and an envisagement of facile, harmonious solutions as a counterpoint to the theme just discussed, the fear of relapsing into childhood. The aversion against childhood relates to the restrictions of pleasure imposed by authorities. The fantasy of being like a child again in the sense of passively receiving benefits stresses an opposite aspect of childhood (or the realization of a childhood dream). This wish to have things done for one is exemplified in a weak young man who looks to an admired older man to act for him in a love affair in which he feels helpless. So, for instance the hero in *Les Hommes ne Pensent qu' à Ca*, who has been unable to take any initiative toward the young woman he adores, needs Don Juan to create the opening for him by assuming his (the young man's) likeness and sweeping the girl off her feet. Only after this strong intermediary has acted on his behalf does the young man become able to pursue the desired relationship.

3. *The superior strength of women.* The image of the strong woman, who knows what she wants and never loses her head, vis-a-vis men who

are just the opposite, has appeared very frequently in recent plays in the Paris theatre.⁴ The same theme occurs also in films, though less prominently. We may suppose that new themes appear first in the theatre, making their way more gradually into films. Thus we would be inclined to see here a trend which may become increasingly marked.⁵

A recent film, *Adorables Créatures*, recounts a series of affairs in the life of a weak young man whom masterful women dispose of as suits their interests. To cite only one episode, he spends a good deal of money to take an acquisitive blonde to a ski resort without winning any amorous concessions from her. As he has broken his leg in descending from a sleigh immediately on arriving at the resort, he spends his time convalescing while his girl friend skis with gusto, and eventually makes the acquaintance of a rich old man for whom she abandons the hero.

The opening sequence of *Manon des Sources* presents a vivid contrast between men and women. In a cafe in a little town a group of men sit around a table drinking and chatting, enjoying their yarns and their little jokes. At the same time in the wild hills outside the town we see two witch-like women, one old and one young, allied with each other in hatred against the town. The black old hag stands on a hilltop with her arms upraised uttering curses. The young woman, beautiful, tattered, and wild, who lives alone in the hills, enters leaping from crag to crag with her goats. She communes affectionately with the malign old woman, who is her only friend. The young woman is suspected of exercising a sinister influence on the young men of the town. After she has undergone the ignominy of an arrest on this charge, she takes revenge, prompted by the old hag, and diverts the water supply of the town. The town council and an outside expert, who sit around a table and argue at length and inconclusively, are helpless to restore the water. The men must wait upon the changing whims of the demonic woman, who can give or withhold the necessities of life. The picture one gets is that of harmless, ineffectual men of the town (mainly seen seated and talking), and untamed powerful women (mainly seen erect or in swift movement), allied with the wild forces of nature.

Adam Est Eve draws the extreme conclusion from the relative advantages of being a woman and being a man. It relates the story of a

⁴ e.g. *La Troisième Femme*, *Treize à Table*, *Les Noces de Deuil*, *Le Chemin de Crête*.

⁵ While film analysis can be carried on in studies of "culture at a distance," films being subject to export, research on theatrical productions requires the presence of the observer in the culture he is studying. Thus theatrical data became available to us as additional background material for film interpretation in the second phase of our French studies, 1953-54. In using the relation between theatre and films as indicative of a trend, we are assuming that what appears first in the theatre will gradually make its way into films. We are interpreting in this sense the greater prominence of the weak man—strong woman theme in plays as compared with films at the present time. However, the alternative hypothesis should be kept in mind, that there is to a degree a division of labor between the two media, different themes being favored by each.

young French soldier, Charlie, drooping and depressed, who has lost his nerve as a boxer (we see him knocked out by a Negro), who on a visit to a prostitute asks her to teach him to knit, and who takes flight from his bride on the wedding night. He seeks help from a woman psychoanalyst who puts him into the hands of a benevolent greybeard surgeon. After two years of treatment, Charlie has been transformed into a ravishing blonde, Charlotte, whose vivacity, bright smile, and active manner contrast very favorably with the sad and feeble aspect of the erstwhile Charlie. Trying to hitch a ride, Charlotte first stands by the roadside dressed in a man's suit; the cars rush past. She changes into a close-fitting feminine costume, resumes her place by the side of the road, and there is an immediate screeching of brakes as the next limousine stops to pick her up. She eventually finds happiness in the arms of a handsome man who confides that until recently he was a woman.⁶

One may discern here a certain weariness in the face of the struggle required of men (symbolized by the boxing match between the young French soldier and the colored man who defeats him), consequently an envy of women, and, in the sphere of private life, a corresponding sentiment that men are weaker than women. The image of the strong and superior woman, which seems currently to be given renewed emphasis, has important traditional antecedents. We need hardly recall that the French national symbol is a vigorous young woman, Marianne. The still powerfully appealing legend of Jeanne d'Arc presents the associated figures of a strong woman and a weak man: Jeanne and the Dauphin.

4. *Old man as child; young woman as mother.* As we have observed before, French film plots are repeatedly occupied with an intense relation between an aging man and a young woman. The underlying significance of this theme, in terms of the special constellation of real-life familial feelings which contribute to it, has not yet been clarified. On the level nearest to the surface, this appears as a counter-oedipal love of an aging father for his daughter who grows to young womanhood. Frequently a close approximation to a father-daughter relation is quite manifest. But we would suppose that this basic fantasy has roots in a much earlier life situation, in the original oedipal phase. We have previously interpreted it in part as motivated by a son's wish to be reconciled with the father who was his rival, and also to revenge himself against the father, by picturing the father in turn as suffering from the frustration of an impossible love. Further observation suggests that the old man and young woman of these plots represent also the original oedipal protagonists: son and mother. It remains to be determined why this particular disguise is chosen, in which age relations are reversed.

The maternal character of the young woman and child-like aspect of the aging man are illustrated in *L'Etrange Désir de M. Bard*. The elderly

⁶ Cf. the play *La Pucelle d'Auteuil*, where doubts about the sexual identity of a man masquerading as a woman can only be resolved by an anatomical inspection, for which the stage is darkened, in the last act.

hero, who knows that he will die soon of heart disease, occupies his last months with happy anticipations of the birth of his heir. He takes his pregnant young wife to Italy so that she can gaze at beautiful sculptures of putti which he believes will make the baby handsome. He borrows a little boy to play with and becomes carried away playing Indians. The young woman, who had originally agreed to have the baby as a business arrangement (the man has a considerable amount of money to leave her), is touched by his naive and eager boyishness and at one point tells him affectionately that he himself is a child who needs to be protected. In *Le Fruit Défendu*, a young woman expresses a similar view of her lover, who is much older but much less experienced than she.

5. *Legitimate façades for the pursuit of pleasure.* In French films and, as other recent observations suggest, in relations of children to parents, there is little belief in the morality of authorities. To mention very briefly some impressions of French life,⁷ French mothers seem disposed to demand of their children an agreeable air of compliance rather than to make sure that the thing they ask is actually performed by the child. The child learns that a blunt refusal of a maternal demand leads to a scene and to punishment, but that a polite verbal expression of acquiescence followed by doing nothing has a good chance of getting by. This is an important lesson in how it is possible to do as one likes if only one is careful to preserve favorable appearances. Further, parents seem concerned with their own pleasure and comfort more than with the inculcation of moral precepts. Their interference with their children's freedom (e.g., in insisting that they stay out of the living room) is for the parents' peace and convenience. The impression that children get would seem to be that parents are concerned with their own pleasure, and that the good behavior they require, so that unpleasant scenes may be avoided, is more a matter of appearance than of actual performance.

We have discussed in our previous studies the image of authorities, particularly the police, in French films. These authorities fail to penetrate to the underlying truth, being repeatedly misled by appearances, suspecting the innocent, letting the guilty escape. We would now add another aspect to this picture of immoral authorities: they use the forms of their office as a thin disguise for the pursuit of pleasure. A farcical illustration of this occurs in *Au Diable la Vertu*. In the course of an investigation of a burglary, the hero, who is falsely suspected, offers the alibi that he spent the night in question with an attractive young woman. The young woman, summoned to the police station, denies his story. He claims he can prove it: In the course of the night's activities he bit her left buttock. The inspector of police demands that the young woman show her left buttock, on which in fact there appears a black and blue mark. It is then necessary for all the men present to make a prolonged inspection of the exposed buttock to determine whether this mark was more likely produced by a bite or by some other cause. In the further pursuit of justice the inspector requires a reenactment of the crime. The victim

⁷ Roland, Charlotte, interviews with French mothers, unpublished.

of the burglary is an old maid who falsely claims that she was raped by the burglar. Panting for the "reenactment" she identifies the hero, to whom she is violently attracted, as her assailant. There follows a scene in her boudoir in which the inspector insists that the hero embrace her, and where, after he has carried her into the bedroom, the police continue their investigation through the keyhole. The picture of such amiable carryings-on of the authorities forms the comic counterpart to the bitter reproach against them for their failures in the pursuit of justice in such tragic films as *Non Coupable*, which we have analyzed earlier. In either case, the authorities see what it pleases them to see.

6. *Non-internalization of moral restrictions.* The tendency to regard restrictions on the pursuit of pleasure as external, not to incorporate them permanently into the personality, is closely related to the view of authorities that we have just discussed. The model of an authority that makes high demands on himself for the renunciation of pleasure seems to be lacking. The continuation into adult life of the restrictions that are imposed on the child appears as foolish and unstable. In *Le Rosier de Mme Husson*, we see a committee of elderly ladies in a small town occupied with choosing a young woman of perfect virtue who would be crowned as "la Rosière" of the town and given a large purse. This of course allows, in the manner of the police inspection which we just described, a fair amount of pleasurable peeping and prying under the façade of a virtuous pursuit. The ladies, after recounting with glee, thinly cloaked by indignation, the misbehavior of all the young girls in the town, find the solution of awarding the prize for virtue to a young man of exaggerated simplicity, who has remained intimidated by a mother who beats him, and who runs away in alarm at the approach of a girl.

Before deciding to give the young man the award, the ladies have to resolve some doubts as to whether he is virtuous or simply an idiot. The young man, although delighted to get the money, becomes aware that, despite all the honor that is being shown him, he is really despised and regarded as defective. Having got drunk at the lunch in his honor, he sets out for Paris, is picked up on the road by a countess, one of the ladies of the committee, who, however, keeps an establishment in Paris where she can pursue a much freer life than in the provincial town. The benevolent countess takes a fancy to the hero, invites him to stay in her flat, where he ends up in her bed. Greatly improved by this initiation, the hero returns home, asserts himself against his astonished mother, forcefully carries off to the barn the country girl whose advances had previously frightened him, and occasions alarm in the town that he has become a veritable *satyre*. Thus the suspicion about the potential dangerousness of the person who seems to lack normal satisfactions asserts itself. At the end of these peripeties, the hero emerges as a young man on the road to adult normality with the announcement of his imminent marriage to his girl.

A policeman in *Manon des Sources* provides a nice image of the difficulty of identifying with moral authority. He speaks of his peculiar pre-

dicament in being a policeman. Each morning he wakes up and sees a policeman's uniform hanging on the wall. He then thinks to himself: Somewhere here there must be a naked policeman. And it is always some minutes before he realizes that it is himself. This expresses not only a difficulty about assuming the role of policeman, but also a wish to expose and degrade authorities in the fantasied anticipation of seeing a naked policeman.

A corollary of the non-internalization of moral precepts is the tendency for unsatisfied impulses to be suppressed rather than repressed. Such impulses remain conscious and waiting for ultimate fulfillment instead of being excluded from consciousness and rendered unuseable. So, for instance, the old maid in *Au Diable la Vertu*, who finally gets a man through the ruse of the legally required reenactment of her alleged rape, asserts with great zest that she has been waiting for this for twenty-five years.

7. *The trauma of abandonment.* French films, as we had previously observed, are occupied to a high degree with experiences of disappointment. This led us to infer as a real life background source a particularly painful early disappointment of lasting effect which was thus repeated in dramatic form. Evidence was lacking, however, as to what this early disappointment might be. On the basis of further material, including research on child rearing, we are now inclined to suppose that this major disappointment is an abandonment (or what is experienced as an abandonment) of the child by the mother. Again to indicate very briefly material that will be presented more fully at a later time, French children seem to be exposed to abandonment in a variety of ways. A number of favored punishments, such as locking the child in a dark closet or in his room, have the effect of isolating the child from contact. There are also threats when the child is naughty to turn him over to some real or mythical person who will carry him away, as well as more realistic threats to send him to boarding school. Instances of mothers leaving their children with others, where the children may feel they have been abandoned, appear to be frequent. But we have the impression that it is above all the capriciousness of the mother, her impulsive alternations between affection, irritation, and withdrawal (for the one relation in French life where uncalculated emotional letting-go is permitted seems to be that of the mother toward her child), which gives the child the feeling of abandonment.

We would interpret the film, *L'Aigle à Deux Têtes*, as an expression of the experience of abandonment. The film deals with a love relation between a mythical kingdom queen and a young man of low degree. The young man, a poet and anarchist, has resolved to assassinate the queen. As he realizes and tells her later, when they are briefly happy together, he has always loved her, but because he could not get near her, he hated her. The confrontation between the two first occurs when the young man, hungry, dirty, bleeding, and exhausted, having been pursued by the

police, breaks into the queen's chamber. There instead of attacking her he collapses, and she, feeling greatly drawn to him (he bears an amazing resemblance to her dead husband), binds up his wound, has her servant carry him to bed, later sees that he is bathed, fed, and dressed in clean clothes. There follows a happy interlude of love between the queen and the young man, which is very soon interrupted as, for involved political reasons, the queen must leave the castle in the mountains where they are in order to return to her capital. In despair at their imminent separation (though he had urged on her the necessity of leaving), the young man swallows poison, which he takes from a locket that the queen had worn on her bosom. The queen, already in her traveling costume, finds the young man on the verge of death and, by telling him that she never loved him, provokes him into stabbing her so that they can die together.

The sequence of emotions experienced by the young man in this drama corresponds to those of an infant in response to his mother's alternating absence and presence. When she is not with him, he is hungry and dirty, and wracked by revengeful and murderous impulses—the condition of the young man when he first appears before the queen. The mother then feeds him, cleans him, and there is an interlude of happy union. But then she is ready to leave him again, it appears as if she never loved him, her good food seems to turn to poison, and he is again filled with murderous impulses toward her. While these are currently assumed to be common exigencies of infantile emotional life, we would suppose that reenforcement from actual maternal behavior contributes to their lasting importance in certain instances. According to our hypothesis, alternations of contact and withdrawal on the part of French mothers make for a particularly intense feeling of abandonment in their children.

8. *Harmonious resolution of difficulties and fulfillment of wishes.* A very pervasive aspect of French films has seemed to us to be their continuous exposure of the frustrating character of life. They have focussed again and again on the unfortunate discrepancy between human wishes and the circumstances that would satisfy them. This has been exemplified in innumerable accidents of timing: desires springing up too early or too late (in children or in aging men), missed opportunities, the evidence that would save an innocent suspect turning up just the moment after his death, and so on. We considered that a major motivation of such plots was the wish to inure oneself to the inevitably disappointing nature of reality by continual reexposure to it in controlled amounts.

At present there appears to be, in the Paris theatre quite markedly, in films as yet less so, an opposite tendency. Situations that would previously have been fraught with painful frustration and ironical wisdom are presented as free of conflict and gratifying for all concerned.⁸ The recent film, *L'Etrange Désir de M. Bard*, which we have already mentioned, shows this tendency to resolve harmoniously predicaments that, in many

⁸ Cf. the plays, *Les Invités du Bon Dieu*, *La Troisième Femme*, and *Faites-Moi Confiance*.

other French films, have been typical occasions of frustration. We have here the classic situation of the aging man and the beautiful young woman, but this time without the familiar conflicts, rivalries, obstacles, or disillusionments. The girl, a very fetching night-club dancer, has no other man in her life. She agrees readily to the old man's proposal to provide him with an heir, and eventually grows quite fond of him. The man resolves the conflict between paternal and amorous motives (which has been so troublesome for so many aging men in French films) by a peculiar twist: he only has paternal motives—he wants to beget a child. At one point his plan to leave his fortune to the girl and the expected child is threatened by a scheme of his relatives to have him declared insane. But, by a heroic effort and just in the nick of time, he passes a series of psychiatric tests that establish his sanity. The whole plot hinges of course on the circumstance that the hero knows he is to die shortly of a bad heart. But the course of developments shows that even for an ugly old man with a bad heart it is not too late to satisfy one's wishes in life. A large part of the film is taken up with his pleasant travels together with the charming girl and a devoted old friend. Also at the end the familiar accidents of timing are happily avoided. The hero (following his psychiatric examination) rushes to the maternity hospital and maintains his waning strength until a young nurse enters to announce the birth of his son. Then he dies with such a beatific smile on his face that it fills with wonder all who see him.

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Let us sum up what seem to us to be new trends in French films, with due qualification in regard to the still limited evidence: a tendency to find a harmonious solution to all difficulties; a tendency to see men as weak and women as strong; and a passive wish to have things done for one. We may find the common denominator of these tendencies in a presumably increasing feeling of incapacity to cope with crushing circumstances. The expectation of being able to inure oneself to the difficulties of life by repeated exposure may thus give way to less realistic fantasies of easy solutions and disappearance of conflict. A sense of men's inadequacies in their undertakings leads to a feeling of weakness in comparison to, and in relation with, women. The wish to have things done for one (by a strong man) is another expression of feelings of weakness. One may suppose that in such developments, certain reality situations in adult life (in this case of a very discouraging nature) serve to evoke otherwise latent earlier experiences, feelings, and fantasies (such as the image of a strong, frightening, and attractive mother and of a longed-for giving father) and to activate a shift in preferred mechanisms of defense (from turning passivity into activity, in the repetition of painful experiences, to the denial of difficulties). These new trends, it should be added, are not at present dominant in French films. Other themes that we have noted, such as the assertion of the right to pleasure once one is no longer a child and mockery of authority, remain more prominent.